The Essence of Prayer

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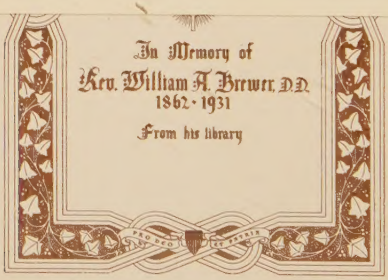

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The Essence of Prayer

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By the

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"O Thou by whom we come to God,
The life, the truth, the way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;
Lord, teach us how to pray."

The Essence of Prayer

I.

DAVID, in one of the psalms, says, "Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk, for I lift up my soul to Thee."

Nothing could more clearly and beautifully define prayer than these words,—"I lift up my soul to Thee." Their deep significance will appear presently.

The psalmist is here pleading his cause before God, argumentatively. He appeals to Him who knows all things, and who therefore knows the

integrity of his approaches to the throne; and, on the basis of that integrity, he makes bold to ask that he may be enabled to walk in the way wherein he should walk. He recognizes the logical and immediate connection between prayer and spiritual growth.

This relation can best be ascertained by analyzing the idea of prayer.

In searching for the real and final essence of prayer, let us, first of all, try to ascertain what it is not.

It is not asking God for something. Petition is not prayer; it is one of the component parts of prayer, or rather

a fruit or result of prayer. We can pray without specific requests; indeed we must learn to pray independently of all thought of gain or return ere we can taste the true joys of prayer. It is meet, right, and our bounden duty to approach God with petitions on our lips, and there shall never dawn the day, in this or the other world, when we shall not wish or need to ask. God expects us to ask, He takes pleasure in receiving our petitions, and there are many things which He will give only to those who do ask. But after all, a whole is greater than any one of its parts. You do not define electricity

by describing a battery. Asking is simply one of the phenomena of prayer; it is not prayer any more than a kiss is love, or a cheer patriotism.

Nor is prayer speaking toward God. There is all the difference in the world between praying and saying prayers, and this becomes evident when we consider how often we say, for example, the Lord's Prayer, without really praying. Never was there a prayer wafted up to the eternal world so good, so deep, so simple, so comprehensive, so beautiful as that prayer which our Lord taught, when His apostles said, "Lord, teach us to

pray." That prayer suffices to express all the love, faith, gratitude, worship, humility, penitence, intercession, and petition, of the whole world; never were words put together to mean so much; and never will the man be born who shall improve it,—as well paint the lily's cheek, or gild refined gold!—and yet we often say it with about as much soul as we say the multiplication table or repeat the capitals of the United States. So, then, speaking to God with words, is not prayer. You remember what our Blessed Lord said to the Pharisees, "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people

draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me."

"The awe that lies too deep for words,
Too deep for solemn looks,—
It finds no way into the face,
No written vent in books."

II.

PRAYER, then, is not the use of good words, especially if they are used in a wrong way. The sweetest words do not sanctify a devotion which is only the service of the lips. If we do not mean what they mean, it is no help to us to use even the very language which our Lord Jesus Christ used and told us to use.

But I must go farther than this. Good words coming forth out of a good heart are not prayer. That is, prayer is more than that. Do you think that it would be impossible for one to pray without words? Not at

all, for one can pray without words just as well as one can do many another thing without words. Words only stand for ideas; they are not ideas. Thoughts come first, naked thoughts; and then they are clothed in words. When a person is angry he feels it before he talks it. Love is in the heart before it speaks by the lips. We need only watch ourselves to find how many feelings and ideas we have within us which are without words, and which we understand perfectly without putting them into language at all.

There is much vocal prayer which is of obligation, such as the offices of

the Church, and no one can safely disuse verbal expression. They who have attained great perfection of prayer reached those heights by the pathway of language, and they are the last devotees in the world to ignore or despise it. But it is still true that they use words sparingly. The nearer they get to God, the more restrained and silent are they. They have been taught of God to listen rather than to talk, and to rest quietly in Him with love and adoration, which is the very essence of prayer, as we shall see presently.

"Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only the lips moved, but her voice was not heard."—I. Samuel i. 13.

III.

IF prayer, in its essence, is not tied to expression by human language, then forms of prayer do not constitute prayer. We can pray without a form of words. The use of pre-composed forms is not prayer, until prayer is added to them. The unwise virgins had nothing but the forms of lamps in their hands; the flame was gone out because there was no oil of prayer in them. No doubt they were very fine lamps and much admired, and these young women doubtless praised them as highly as we often praise the Prayer Book. But when

they stood before the shut door, and cried, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" the Lord did not know them. He had no place in the marriage festivities for empty lamps and foolish virgins.

In all that I have said about words, or the outward habiliments of prayer, and about forms of prayer, nothing has been said against the right use of words and forms. When used as they should be, they are almost indispensable. I say, almost, because there are very few people who can pray in the Spirit without giving utterance to their inner thoughts or feelings. That kind of prayer which does not require words

comes only to those devout souls who have lived in constant communion with God for many years, and have learned just to love God without saying so, and to rest in Him with holy silence and unutterable sweetness of trust. Their hearts are always overflowing with love and praise. God is always in their thoughts, and He is associated by them with all the events of their daily life. Their prayers are like those exquisite musical compositions of Mendelssohn called "Songs Without Words." But the best of us have not reached those calm altitudes of pure devotion. We must have words and forms, and we

need them so much that it does not seem like prayer not to fall back on them, nor (let me again say) would I for a moment advise against their right use; but again let me insist that the essence of prayer is to be found above and beyond words and forms.

"To love Thee, and yet not to think
That I can love so much,—
To have Thee with me, Lord, all day,
Yet not to feel Thy touch!"

IV.

AGAIN, prayer does not consist in any particular stir of the emotions. Some people think they do not pray unless they shed tears, or thrill with a deep joy, or have some special storm of emotion, or feel some wave of peace stealing over them. There is nothing to object to in these conditions when they come without invitation or effort, but they do not belong to the essence of prayer.

Emotional stir in religion is not to be despised, but at the same time emotion is not religion; and as everything that is true may be changed to false

by a wrong use of it, it has often happened that people who mistook emotion for religion found that it had no power to make them holy, and no strength to stay with them except for a night. "In the morning it vanisheth away." Those who think their prayers are not acceptable to God unless attended with excitation of the feelings do not understand God. He wants something better than the tributes which we pay to the pathetic passages of a story, or the melting scenes of a play, or the eloquence of an orator, or the solemnity of a burial. He wants our bare selves, feeling or no feeling. If He can get

control of our wills, through our surrendering to His loving authority, our feelings will follow in their train. The same is true of our prayers. We can pray as acceptably to God when we are calm as when we are stirred up, and perhaps more so. The best prayer is that which comes from a determined exercise of the will, a will to pray whether one feels like it or not.

Let us also reflect that what we call enjoyment in prayer, aside from forming no essential part of prayer, has this disadvantage, that it tempts us to measure our prayer by the pleasure we find in it. True prayer

like every other grace must take up its cross. It develops on the principle of being made perfect by suffering. He who prays for the pleasure of it is enamored of confections rather than nutritious food.

And I wish finally to observe that prayer is not an expedient for securing a tranquil state of mind for ourselves. That may be, indeed sometimes is, the fruit of true prayer; but there are some who think and say that that is all there is in prayer. It is good only because it turns around and exercises a soothing influence upon us. It does not really go so far up as heaven's throne, but falls quickly

down into our own hearts and leaves its only blessing there. If that were all, then it would be well to pray on; but not well to use such meaningless language as we do in our prayers. If prayer is good only because by its reflex influence we help ourselves, then let us leave out the name of God and substitute our own. It is dishonest and self-deceiving to use language in devotion which stands for something else. Be honest, if you die for it.

A thousand times better would it be to pray in an unknown, than in an untrue tongue. True prayer does not assume the shape of a counterfeit de-

votion, but looks up to God as the source of all blessing, and as the One Being to whom we owe worship, homage, love, and obedience.

"Prayer is the action of the heart, responsive to the innate attraction of God, when perceived. The soul sees God with more or less clarity of vision as supremely glorious, beautiful, wise, magnetic, good, and true; it realizes its own filial relation to Him as to a Father, and loves Him as such. This attraction justifies the love; and prayer is simply love pouring itself out in tribute to its infinite Object."

V.

AND this leads me on to the affirmative definition of prayer towards which I have been working thus far.

The psalmist says, for that I lift up my soul to Thee therefore do Thou cause me to know the way wherein I should walk.

The very gist and kernel of prayer is the lifting up of the soul to God. It is the creature drawing near to and nestling in the bosom of the Creator. It is the prodigal son falling at the feet of the dear old father. It is the surrender of the heart to its

conqueror. It is love imperfect kissing love divine. It is the soul shutting its ears to all sounds, its eyes to all sights, its senses to all material things, its mind to all earthly themes, and fixing itself in loving concentration upon Him who is its All in all, the only Being whom we dare to love with all our heart. It is all this and more, with or without words, with or without forms, with or without feelings, with or without requests. It is all this, not because we need something to be given us, but because we need to give something, even ourselves, to God. It is all this, not because of the one who prays, but be-

cause of Him to whom we pray. In one word, prayer is, essentially, the soul habitually looking at God with love and adoration.

If our Christian life may be represented by the similitude of a landscape, with mountains, hills, valleys, streams, meadows, and oceans, then prayer is the beautiful blue sky, which overarches the whole scene.

In other words, prayer is an inclusive term. With reference to the Majesty of God, it is worship. With reference to what He has revealed of Himself, it is awe, love, and appreciation. With reference to those solemn upward extensions of His Being

which He has not revealed, which make Him, to us, the Incomprehensible One—those infinite heights that are veiled, ineffable, never to be fully disclosed, the true home and source of all that has been revealed, itself not revealable—that infinitude of absolute existence which is so much more than we know that what we know is by comparison to it like the first words which infants utter;—with reference to all this unknownness, prayer is adoration, humility, silence. With reference to human needs, prayer is an asking. With reference to the needs of mankind, it is intercession. With reference to the mem-

ory, it is seeking and finding in the past, reasons for present repentance and gratitude. With reference to the understanding, it is meditation. With reference to the affections, it is the ascension of the heart above all other objects of love. With reference to the will, it is our entire self-abandonment into the hands of God so that His will reigns and our's is blended with His.

But everything that is included in the idea must be transfigured by the heart's love for God. There can be no prayer until the heart is drawn by that mysterious force of attraction which lifts man to the supreme

Beauty and sovereign Good—the everlasting God; and learns to pour itself out in spontaneous affection towards its infinite Object.

Let a man begin the Christian life with this kind of prayer; or, let him revolutionize his Christian life and use true prayer instead of his past imperfection of prayer; and let him continue steadfastly in this way, praying to God not so much to get something as to give everything—and the result will be an immediate and continuous increase of all the qualities of character which make a real follower of Jesus Christ.

"He knows how to live aright who knows how to pray aright."—S. Augustine.

VI.

SINCE the very inner essence of prayer is communion with God, it follows that communion must produce resemblance. We are to a great extent the product of our companionships, and many a vicious nature has been made virtuous by association with pure and lovely characters. This is true with emphasis of those who are always in the Spirit, who go carrying God with them in their hearts wherever they go, who have learned the precious art of praying without ceasing, to whom God is the one stupendous and overwhelming re-

ality of the world, whose love is as real as His Person is adorable. Thus prayer is the very principle of the soul's life, and as it grows in constancy and gentleness and purity, it weans the heart away from wrong things, and teaches it not to make too much of allowable things. If it does not occupy itself as much as it once did with vocal approaches to God, nor make as much as it did of methods of devotion, it spends more time in prayer, for it never ceases to pray. The Saviour has taught it the lesson that prayer is rather an abiding state of the heart than an occasional address to God. It is the lifting up of

the soul to God, which lifts itself higher and higher, and thus grows more and more in holiness and pureness of living.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not teaching that we must seek a state of spiritual development in which we shall be able to do without the Church, the sacraments, the ministry, the language and form of prayer. Far from it! The lesson is that we must first learn to pray with the heart, in the heart, from the heart; we must begin with God, we must work upward to Him, and, with the power of love which He will surely give us, we can then work

downward into the true spiritual use of all the means and methods of grace, and, instead of feeling emancipated from them, find ourselves getting more from them than ever before. O how much more the Church would be to her children if they would only get the new eyesight by which to discern her spiritual glory!

If they would but open their eyes to the fact that prayer is the very atmosphere of the Church, they would find more intelligible the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and the Church! How large a portion of the sacramental offices is intended to be the vehicle of direct approach to

God! How the psalms and lessons are saturated with the spirit of prayer!

I am sure we all need to acquire at any cost this art of lifting up the soul to God. I am sure of it because so few have it, because all may secure it, and because if we do not get it now,—WHEN?

There is no mystery in it. To love God is in itself as simple a thing as to love one's mother or one's child. There is no difficulty in it. We all have some love for God in us, and in part know what it is to lift the soul up to God. The difficult thing is to make the occasional the habitual,—to

get the spirit of prayer transformed from an infrequent luxury into the soul's daily bread; and that means a great task,—the task of thinking more about God than anything else, or putting everything else into the secondary place where of right it belongs. In one word a man who truly prays is a man who always prays, and he learns to keep within him the abiding spirit of prayer by seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Lift up your hearts, O Christian people! Nothing is really hard to him who desires. They who truly desire it shall find God. That desire is

itself the token that they have found. Lift up your hearts, for you have only to follow along the path where your feet now are until you reach the high and beautiful planes of peace and abiding communion with God.

"We grow by increase of love for God through prayer, and by decrease of love for self through mortification."

VII.

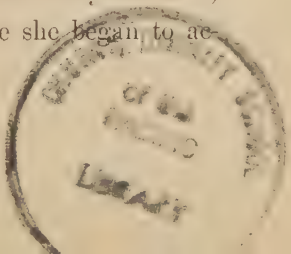
THREE words in conclusion:

1. The condition precedent of essential prayer is a clean conscience. God's pity lends an ear to the voice of sinners coming penitent to His feet; but "he that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination." "Now we know that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshiper of God and doeth His will, him He heareth." Nothing but a good repentance can remove these impediments. The soul must seek in absolution to be made white in the blood

of the Lamb, and to persevere faithfully in the acquisition of love for God and His Presence.

2. As prayer is so primary in place and importance, and so generative of all other graces, the spiritual enemy plants himself strongly in the path of those who seek to rise to the heights of devotion. It is for this reason necessary that the soul which seeks to make God All in all shall fight its way upward, willing to brave all the terrors of another Gethsemane and another Calvary, rather than be defeated of its purpose. "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." What

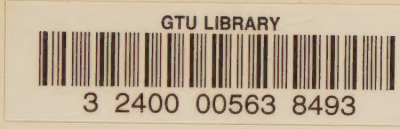
hosts of doubts, fears, distractions, natural disinclinations, have to be attacked and subdued! Remember that "prayer is a fire that is fed from the wood of the cross." St. Theresa passed eighteen years of conflict, going to prayer as if she went to fight with enemies, so great was her aversion. "The sadness I felt on entering my oratory was so great, that it required all my courage to force myself in." But in the end the Lord came to her help, showing her fatal mistake to have been in placing her confidence partly in herself and not wholly and absolutely in God, and from that time she began to ac-



quire heroic graces and highest measures of sanctity. One hour of prayer she said was more to her now than words could express, and each hour was a sufficient reward for all the long years of gloom—a gloom so deep that only one ray penetrated it, and that was her determination to fight on till death or victory came to her relief.

3. The spirit of prayer like all other gracious gifts is a constantly augmenting force in the soul. Indeed its growth is the token of its healthy presence. Beginning with the vocal devotions of the little child, its evolution tends towards the most

exalted experiences of union and communion with God, so that the soul becomes one with Him. This is the most blessed condition which is practicable to the Christian here, and may be called the novitiate of heaven.



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